

A Teacher's Guide to Talking About Death

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Death is an inevitable part of life. Teachers and children can talk about death as a part of the life cycle. That can take some of the mystery and fear out of dealing with death.

Children go through a series of stages in their understanding of death.

- Infants and toddlers will not understand the idea of death, but they may perceive that adults are sad when someone dies. They also may miss a family member and show signs that they feel the loss. They have no real understanding about the meaning or significance of death.
- Preschool children are beginning to understand death at a simple level. They usually see death as reversible, temporary, and impersonal. Death may seem to be connected to magic. Watching cartoon characters on television die and then come back to life tends to reinforce this notion.
- Between ages 5 and 9, most children are beginning to realize that death is final and that all living things die. They begin to understand the kinds of circumstances that may result in death. Death is still perceived as something that happens to others, not to them or their family. They may believe they can escape death. Children also may think of death as a person. Death may be a skeleton or an angel of death in their minds. Some children get nightmares about such images.
- From ages 10 through adolescence, children begin to understand death more fully. They learn that people die and do not come back to life. They realize that all living things die and that they too will die some day. Some teens and preteens will try to see how death fits in their lives. Some will test death. They might take risks with their lives to see what control they have. Others may seek the meaning of life.

As a teacher or childcare provider, you might need to help the children in your care deal with death. Here are some suggestions for your classroom:

- Death can be scary. Keep your classroom warm and supportive.
- Pay attention. Listen to children's questions and ideas. Notice when they want to talk or ask questions about death. Let the conversation be guided by the children's interests and questions.
- Some children will want to talk about death. Others will not. Keep the discussion general. Invite children to talk about death, but do not force them.
- Try to give short and simple answers. Make sure that the children can understand. Do not use too many words.
- Accept the children's feelings. Let them know it is OK to be sad, angry, or confused.
- Tell the parents after you talk with the children about death. Help them think of ways to talk more at home.
- Provide parents with [books and fact sheets](#) that might help them.
- Respect the parents' right to teach values and beliefs. Do not teach children about things such as angels or heaven. That is the parents' job. You may tell the children what you believe, but let the families have different beliefs.

Build your skills for talking about difficult topics like death. Ask teachers and other people around you for ideas. Think about inviting speakers to talk to your class about death or related topics. Plan a visit to a hospital. Talk with a doctor about keeping our bodies healthy. Use your imagination to find simple and honest ways to help the children to feel comfortable about life and death.

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